

Serbian warfare seeks 'murder of cities'

The underlying cultural-historical factor in the war in former Yugoslavia is the battle between "city lovers and city haters," with the Serbs playing the role of modern-day "Huns" committed to "the ritual murder of the city," writes former Belgrade Mayor Bodgan Bogdanovic, in an article that appeared in English translation in the May 27 *New York Review of Books*. Bogdanovic was the mayor of Belgrade from 1982 to 1986. He is described by many of Serbia's most bitter opponents as "one of the few truly honorable and courageous Serbian centers of resistance" against the Milosevic-Karadzic clique.

He writes that he "cannot comprehend why military strategy should make the destruction of cities a main—if not *the* main goal," in the fighting in former Yugoslavia. He says that "the civilized world . . . will never forget the way we destroyed our cities. We—we Serbs—shall be remembered as despoilers of cities, latter-day Huns. The horror felt by the West is understandable; for centuries, it has linked the concepts 'city' and 'civilization,' associating them even on an etymological level. It therefore has no choice but to view the destruction of cities as flagrant, wanton opposition to the highest values of civilization."

Bogdanovic goes on: "What makes the situation even more monstrous is that the cities involved are beautiful, magnificent cities: Osijek, Vukovar, Zadar, with Mostar and Sarajevo waiting their turn. The strike on Dubrovnik—I shudder to say it, but say it I must—was intentionally aimed at an object of extraordinary, even symbolic beauty. It was the attack of a madman who throws acid in a beautiful woman's face and promises her a beautiful face in return. That it was not the work of a savage's unconscious ravings, however, is clear from the current plan to rebuild Baroque Vukovar in a nonexistent Serbo-Byzantine style, an architectural fraud if there ever was one and a sign of highly questionable motives.

"Were our theologians a bit more imaginative, I might interpret their vision of a Serbo-Byzantine Vukovar to be the parable of a heavenly city coming to earth as a temporary, tangible sign of the heavenly Serbia to come. But if we take a more prosaic look at the idea of forcing the willfully destroyed Vukovar to change its face, we see it as no more than a wild military fantasy, like the [Nazis'] one of razing Warsaw's Old Town and erecting a new Teutonic Warsaw from the ashes."

Manichean battle

"For years," the former Belgrade mayor continues, "I had been developing the thesis that one of the moving forces behind the rise and fall of civilizations is the eternal Manichaeon—yes, Manichaeon—battle between city lovers and city haters, a battle waged in every nation, every culture, every individual. It had become an obsession with me. My students enjoyed hearing me go on about it, but also smiled at one another as if to say, 'He's at it again.' Then came the moment when I realized to my horror that 'it' was our day-to-day reality.

"Together with ritual murder as such I see the ritual murder of the city. And I see the murderers of the city in the flesh. How well they illustrate the tales I told in the lecture hall, tales of the good shepherd and the evil city, of Sodom and Gomorrah, of the walls of Jericho tumbling down and the wiles of Epeios and his Trojan Horse, of the Koran's curse: that all cities of this world shall be destroyed and their wayward inhabitants transformed into monkeys. Today's grand masters of destruction take pleasure in expounding their motives; they take pride in them. After all, from time immemorial cities have been razed in the name of the purest of convictions, the highest, strictest moral, religious, class, and racial criteria.

"City despisers and city destroyers haunt more than our books; they haunt our lives. From what depths of a misguided national spirit do they rise and where are they headed? On what muddled principles do they base their views? By what images are they obsessed and in what morbid books do they find them? Clearly in books that have nothing to do with history. For the savage has trouble grasping that anything could have existed before him; his idea of cause and effect is primitive, monolithic, especially when it takes shape during coffee-house confabulations.

"The phenomenon I am trying to describe may in the end defy description. I therefore ask my readers to accept these thoughts as a bleak attempt to combine cognition and intuition and get at the roots of the savage's ancient, archetypal fear of the city. But while in ancient times that fear was a 'holy fear' and therefore subject to regulation and restraint, today it represents the unbridled demands of the basest mentality. What I sense deep in the city destroyers' panic-ridden souls is a malicious animus against everything urban, everything urbane, that is, against a complex semantic cluster that includes spirituality, morality, language, taste, and style. From the 14th century onward the word 'urbanity' in most European languages has stood for dignity, sophistication, the unity of thought and word, word and feeling, feeling and action. People who cannot meet its demands find it easier to do away with it altogether.

"The fates of Vukovar, Mostar, and Sarajevo's Bas-carsi-ja—the old Turkish center of the town—bode ill for the future of Belgrade. . . . Cities fall not only physically, as a result of outside pressure; they fall spiritually, from within. . . ."